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Leaks

Hard-pressed presidents

WASHINGTON, DC

Mr Ronald Reagan has now officially joined the parade of American presidents made furious by waking up in the morning to read in the newspapers what they thought were closely held secrets. The history of White House outrage over leaks is legendary. Lyndon Johnson actually reversed some of his decisions and cancelled personnel selections just to prove leaked stories wrong. President Nixon authorised wiretaps of aides and reporters and created the famous "plumbers unit" which went so far as to commit burglary in its effort to stop the leaks. Mr Jimmy Carter, who had campaigned on a platform of open government, instituted internal investigations of his own to identify leakers and once reprimanded subordinates in terms so strong that one was moved to remark "If I'd closed my eyes, I'd have thought it was Nixon".

Mr Reagan has disclosed in interviews that the extent of the leaks is the biggest surprise of his first year in office. It is also a source of major irritation—so much so that recently he wanted to order an end to all "background" (not-for-attribution) and off-the-record interviews granted by government officials. He was dissuaded by subordinates who convinced him this was not practical. Instead, Mr Reagan's new national security adviser, Mr William Clark, has drafted a policy memo requiring advance clearance for interviews in which classified information might be discussed. It has also authorised the use of "all legal means" to identify leakers.

The specifics of the Clark policy have yet to be spelled out, but an indication of what may happen is the defence department's new policy of putting pressure on top officials to take polygraph examinations in an effort to find leakers. Twenty-five people, including Mr Carlucci, the deputy secretary of defence, and the secretary of the navy, have undergone lie-detector tests. But still the government has been unable to discover who told the Washington Post about a highly secret report that the administration's full rearmament programme might eventually cost not \$1.5 trillion, as announced, but \$2.25 trillion.

This case illustrates three facts about leaks, the measures taken to plug them and attitudes in Washington towards the problem. First, the government often reacts with passion to disclosures that in

no way damage the nation's security. No codes, identities of secret agents or nuclear war plans were involved, but merely budget estimates that were politically embarrassing. Often presidents get mightily excited over purely domestic leaks, some of which are for the specific purpose of getting the president to pay attention to a subordinate's argument.

The second fact is that efforts to root out leakers and plug leaks seem doomed to failure, regardless of what method—legal or illegal—is employed. Mr Nixon caught no one with his wiretaps. Presidential rage does not seem to suffice, either. The third fact is that much of Washington, and especially the press, regards the whole matter of leaks as a game that presidents are supposed to play with good humour. Any official who gets serious enough about it to complain is lampooned or treated as a menace to freedom of speech.

But for so many presidents to become so consistently exercised suggests that something dangerous may be occurring. A list of the government's most serious losses through leaks indicates that real damage has occasionally been done to the national interest. The Nixon administration lost 18 months' worth of preparation for arms control talks when its initial and fallback positions were made public. The wiretaps were ordered after disclosure of the secret bombing of Cambodia seriously complicated relations with the Siha-nouk government.

President Carter delivered his Nixonian lecture after a subordinate told a reporter, at a crucial moment in the Iranian revolution, that the United States no longer believed the Shah could survive. President Reagan got most angry about leaks concerning the manufacture of neutron warheads, security precautions against Libyan assassination squads and the decision to sell F-5E warplanes to Taiwan.